

One Step from Reality by maeofthedead

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Summary:

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1. Chapter 1

“Will...”

The sound echoed between the walls, walls that flickered and changed from tile floor and poster-filled hallways to a dark and desolate pathway that lead nowhere. Or it lead somewhere, but nowhere good.

“Will...”

His own name sounded strange to him, a series of indistinct noises that laced themselves together into an identifier. There were days he couldn't seem to attach it to himself in his own mind and it seemed that it was just by chance that those sounds had been attached together to mean something.

“Will!”

Will recoiled from his own name as it doubled in size and in tone, one high pitched and the other low. It was too close, everything was too close. There were too many teeth and not enough places to hide. His breath hitched before doubling in speed and something touched his arm and he swallowed a scream and turned around ready to run. Instead all he saw was,

“Mike...hi.”

Mike had taken a step back away from Will's violent reaction to being startled, looking unsettled himself, eyes relaxing back from being thrown wide.

“You okay?”

Will felt his heart drop to the bottom of his stomach and he plastered a smile on his face that he'd practiced in front of a mirror for hours until he'd gotten it just right. One of the long-forgotten 'missing' posters was folded and stashed away in his room only to be pulled out when he needed the reminder of what the expression looked like, his face wrinkled and folded but his smile genuine. He couldn't

remember how it felt, though.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

It was an odd feeling, to come back to a place where he was mourned, a place he was never expected to return to. But Will supposed he’d have to go back to school eventually. His mom had held him tight and close like it was his first day of school all over again.

He squirmed, telling her he’d be ok and then laughed when Jonathan passed by, messing up his hair and telling him to hurry up. Will went through the motions like he wasn’t just as afraid to leave as his mother was to let him.

Walking the halls again was odd, and not just because certain areas of the school were taped off, one of the science labs was closed for an undisclosed amount of time. Mike’s eyes lost some of their shine when Will asked about it, so he stopped. Dustin pulled him aside and explained as plainly and as gently as he could that that was where Eleven disappeared.

The hallways were full of people that would stare at him, like he was a different kind of freak.

With the exceptions of Mike, Dustin and Lucas, conversations seem to fade whenever and wherever he appeared, petering off into an overwhelming silence. Silences he couldn’t fill.

Mr. Clarke had greeted Will warmly, not drawing attention to him before or during the lesson but pulling him aside after the bell had rung. His friends hovered nearby, spectators to another one of Will’s reunions with reality.

Mr. Clarke put one large hand on Will’s shoulder and opened and shut his mouth a couple times before he knelt down to level out their distance.

“It’s good to have you back, Will.”

And Will smiled, trying his best to channel the ‘miracle child’ that adults whispered about when they thought he wasn’t paying attention, the friend and son that’d come back from the Upside Down right side up instead of somewhere in the middle.

“Thanks, Mr. Clarke.”

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Curled up on his bed with his arms wrapped around his legs, Will barely rocked back and forth, Jonathan’s new mixtape on but turned down as low as possible. The voice was slight and strained, barely reaching him, but background noise was better than no noise at all.

His fingernails dug into his arms, leaving marks that would fade by morning; his breath came in short gasps before it dissolved into a cough that reached into his chest to tear something out.

It fell on the bed sheets, making no noise.

Unfolding himself, Will scrambled for his nightstand to grab something, anything, to make it disappear.

His hand landed on wood that was covered. It wasn’t supposed to be. It felt like moss and human skin woven together to create a grotesque mockery of the familiarity of his home. The soft light from his lamp had faded, replaced instead by a glow that had no source. It covered him, blanketed him, trapped and hid him all at once.

Will bit down on his hand and resisted the urge to scream. It would find him if he made any noise.

He was still here, he never left, and he was never going to leave. He was going to be stuck here forever. He’d die one step removed from reality. He was going to die here in a world that didn’t care because it was empty.

Will hit the ground with a thud. It was soft, carpeted, normal and he reveled in it, gripped it tight, pulling out loose pieces and held on. He breathed in once, twice and then opened his eyes.

His room was back to normal, he’d barely missed the mixtape

skipping to the next song. Will sucked in one long breath, waiting for it to break into another series of coughs but it didn't. With little ceremony, he stood up and picked up one of his shoes off the floor.

The thing he'd produced wiggled and squirmed on his bed and Will steeled himself before swiping it off with the toe of his shoe. Once it landed on the ground he slammed the shoe down on top of it and leaned a good portion of his weight down from the top. Will couldn't tell if it was just in his head, but he thought he could feel it moving beneath him.

He felt sick.

After what felt like an eternity, Will gingerly knelt down and lifted the shoe up slowly to find...

Nothing. Nothing squashed into the carpet, nothing sticking to the back of his shoe. Just an empty space.

2. Chapter 2

Together, soon after Will recovered, the Byerses set about putting their house back together. With the help of their friends, Christmas lights were taken down, carpet was replaced, letters were painted over, walls fixed, and wallpaper reapplied.

From the outside, it looked like nothing had ever happened, no monster from another dimension, no epic showdown, no disappearance.

Will started to wonder if people would forget, erase it from their minds like they erased it from the corners of his house. He wondered how they could move on when he was still stuck, sinking and drowning.

So he pretended to move on with them.

It was easier to convince himself of that when he was in daylight.

Will stared at the ceiling as moonlight shone through his window, casting shadows that reached out for him. Sleep did not come as easily as it once had, instead turning into long nights that felt endless and made the days seem even more so.

He rubbed both eyes with clenched hands, letting out a long groan as he saw stars. Time passed and eventually he pushed himself off his bed, flipped on the light and padded out to his doorway. The door creaked as it opened and Will froze to listen. When the silence continued, he let out a short breath and slowly headed down the hallway.

Past Jonathan's room, past his mother's room there was a closet where they'd stashed the extra Christmas lights. Will wasn't completely sure why they hadn't just gotten rid of them, but when he opened the closet door, he felt something tense in his chest when he reached for one box.

Claiming it like a treasure, Will scampered back to his room, careful to keep away from the parts of the floor that squeaked. Once he was

inside he opened the box and reached in for the string of tangled, multi-colored bulbs.

Under where his lamp was plugged in, Will sought out the other outlet and slid the plug into place.

The lights shown, red, green, yellow, and blue, throwing the shadows into obscurity, and as Will untangled them with patient hands, he felt like he could breathe again.

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"Mom, I'll be fine," Will went to grab his backpack leaning against his feet, his other hand going for the door handle. His mom's fingers tapped against the steering wheel in an aimless beat as the car rumbled beneath them.

"Are you sure? I can take you with me and you can do some homework in the backroom, or..."

"Mom," She stopped and Will turned to meet her worried gaze with a small smile, and some of the tension she always carried with her faded.

She reached for him and wrapped one arm around his shoulders, holding him tight and Will soaked it in, breathing in the moment, and all at once he didn't want her to go. A phantom ache shook him down to his core and suddenly he missed her, even though she was right there.

"You call the store if you need me, ok?"

"Alright," Will agreed, the first to pull away, then he opened the door before he was truly ready and jumped out. His mom folded herself across the seats, hair starting to fall out of her ponytail in front of her eyes, to tell him,

"Jonathan'll pick you up later!"

"Okay!"

He waved as she drove away, ignoring how much longer it took than

usual for her to reach the corner, and then turned back to see Dustin standing on the front porch.

Dustin caught his look and smiled his familiar smile, one that lacked teeth but never sincerity. Anytime Dustin smiled he meant it one hundred percent, it was something that Will both admired and envied, especially now. He tried to meet it with one of his own and even as Dustin's widened in response, Will felt guilty that he couldn't match it.

"Hey!"

Will raised one hand up in acknowledgement, hiking his backpack higher on his shoulder as he stepped forward. Dustin met him halfway and slung an arm around his shoulders to pull him inside.

"So my mom's gone right now and my dad's at work. We have the whole house to ourselves."

"Cool." Even though he couldn't manage to muster up the energy that Dustin possessed, he let himself be carried away by it.

Once they made it inside, Dustin pulled the door shut and they ran up the stairs. Will felt a burst of adrenaline and almost fell as the stairs turned mossy and slimy then back again. He gripped the banister and willed Dustin to move faster. Once they reached the top, Will skidded to a stop and glanced down to the first floor.

There was nothing there. Will's heart beat in his chest moving down to finger tips and thudding behind his eyes, making the world shake. His backpack slid down his arm, threatening to fall to the floor.

"Will?"

Will managed to keep himself from jumping and turned back to Dustin who'd stopped just short of entering his room to check on him.

"You ok?"

Will twitched. There were days when that question really began to scratch at his nerves.

“Yeah.”

Dustin raised one eyebrow, opened his mouth but then closed it, gesturing to his room instead. Once inside, Dustin flopped onto his bed, the springs bouncing and creaking beneath him. Will settled on the floor and pulled out his homework.

It'd been awhile since Will had gone to Dustin's to work on homework, long enough that what had once been a regular pastime turned awkward. Neither of them talked much and Will couldn't tell anymore whether that was normal or not.

Hanging out with his friends used to be as natural as breathing, but now he felt unsure of what to do, if pauses in the conversation were standard and when they grew too long. Instead, Will tapped his pencil against his math book, letting the sound fill the air and hoping it'd serve as a suitable replacement.

“Oh!”

In the end it was Dustin who broke the silence, Will glanced up as his friend jumped off the other side of the bed to rifled through a stack of miscellaneous sheets of paper.

“What're you--”

Dustin made a triumphant sound, scrambling over his sheets to land next to Will, revealing a comic book. It took Will a moment to realize, his eyes crossed in an effort to try and distinguish what exactly the shapes and colors formed into.

Will blinked a couple times and the red, black, and yellow images morphed into something recognizable.

“X-Men 134,” Dustin provided when Will just blinked a couple times and Dustin's eyes grew tight around the edges even as Will finally took it. “Race rules. They still apply, even if you cheated.”

Will tried to reach back in his memory and pull out something useful, something related, but everything that came back was fuzzy and indistinct, dark and toxic. But he grinned nonetheless, flipping it open to lay on top of his homework.

“It’s not my fault you’re slow.”

“Hey,” Dustin shoved at his shoulder and Will laughed, and somehow it felt natural. They shoved and pushed each other for a moment, comic forgotten. Then Dustin, curly hair springing from his head like a halo, laughed, “It’s good to have you back, Will.”

And for that moment, Will could feel it too.

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Will had always been amazed at his brother's ability to capture a moment in time, a story stolen, frozen and displayed to revisit. But as he grew older he realized that the stories they shared were never complete, the edges weren't able to reach far enough to encompass everything that needed telling.

So after some deliberation, he started drawing in an attempt to reach those unseen spaces and tell those stories

They didn't start out great in those beginning days, regardless of what his mom told him. A collage of colors and shapes that messily folded themselves together in an attempt to create something of meaning. One way or another, they always found themselves attached to the fridge. They were his own stories to tell and reshape how he'd like.

His mom and Jonathan often found themselves in the pages, scribbled and scratched as the most constant parts of his life. His dad rarely made an appearance and when he did his mom's eyes would get tight around the edges and her lips would thin. Will stopped drawing him.

He practiced, and over time he began to create pieces he could feel proud of, the campaigns Mike put together offering no end of inspiration. The stories were more magical, less tied to reality, but they still contained something familiar.

Then the Upside Down happened, his life becoming a series of before and afters.

A new set of crayons found their way into the Byers' home when his

mom noticed he hadn't been drawing much. Will thanked her, hugged her, and snatched up the box and sheets of paper. He sat at the table poised and ready.

And Will tried. He tried drawing their newest campaigns, but nothing came out right, he tried drawing Jonathan, he tried drawing his mom. They looked perfectly fine, just how he remembered them, but a weight settled into his stomach, heavy and immovable.

Will picked up the black crayon and pressed it to his unfinished picture. The world changed and distorted and Will flinched but continued, determined to finish what he'd started. His chest tightened and then released and the crayon snapped but the damage was done.

The world stretched and then snapped back to normal, the sun reached through the curtains and Will leaned back to examine his ruined piece. What he'd meant to be a picture of him and his friends was now distorted and indistinguishable, himself most of all. He'd scrubbed himself from existence.

The heavy feeling faded.

Will lifted one side of the picture and folded it once, twice, until it refused to bend and then he began to tear until there was nothing left but small, black pieces.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry for the wait! I started a new job that eats most of my time, and I'm a slow writer as it is so that doesn't help.

Anyway! Thank you so much for reading! Come bother me on tumblr at maeofthedeath if you feel so inclined.